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ABSTRACT

Whereas in the past innovations in the education of younger children have led to changes in the education of older children, the direction of influence now appears to have changed. The influence on the kindergarten by the primary grades seems to be changing kindergarten practice. In reconstituting the kindergarten to make it more responsive to the needs of primary education, a number of strategies have been taken. One is to adopt prescribed prepared educational programs that are a downward extension of textbook series in academic areas. Other kindergarten-specific, prescriptive programs have been designed to ensure that children will learn prerequisites necessary for success in later school learning. A number of influences have led to the present situation. Among the influences are the following: (1) kindergarten attendance has become the rule rather than the exception; (2) there have been major shifts in the orientations of early childhood curriculum; (3) there have been parallel shifts in developmental theories used to justify early childhood curriculum; (4) there has been a societal press to offer academic instruction at an early age; (5) there has been an increase in the use of standardized achievement tests in evaluating the educational progress of young children; and (6) many kindergarten teachers are inadequately prepared to be effective early childhood curriculum makers. (Author/RH)

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PRESSURES THAT PROMOTE CURRICULUM SCHEMES IN KINDERGARTEN

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Not too long ago a colleague from overseas came to the University of Illinois to serve as a visiting scholar. She was the director of early childhood education in a school system abroad. In addition to providing her with an opportunity to engage in her own studies on campus, I felt she should visit schools in the surrounding community to get a sense of early childhood education as it is practiced in the American Heartland.

Before our initial visit to the field, we had engaged in some discussion related to the articulation of various levels of early childhood programs. In her native country, kindergartens are separate and distinct from the primary school. They are housed in separate institutions and the kindergarten teachers are responsible to kindergarten supervisors and from there directly to the director of early childhood education in the Ministry of Education. There is no supervision or oversight by the principal of the local primary school and primary education and early childhood or kindergarten education are in separate parallel departments of the Ministry.

I voiced some concerns that the administrative separation of the kindergartens from primary education, would make cooperation between educators concerned with continuous age levels difficult. Programs that may not be conceptually consistent and children might be burdened with a greater problem than of adjustment in making the move from the kindergarten to the primary school.

My colleague's strong conviction was that kindergartens need to remain separate and autonomous to survive. If they were in the primary schools or if the kindergarten teachers were responsible to primary school administrators, they would become more like primary classrooms and their goals and purposes would be subsumed under those of the primary school.

Our first visit was to an elementary school about thirty miles south of our town. I had been invited there by a former student who taught third grade and I thought this would give us an opportunity to view the entire early childhood spectrum, since we had also received permission to spend time in the kindergarten and first and second grades.

We spent the morning in the school, observing children and teachers in action and speaking with the teachers, the principal and others who were in the school. As we left the building and entered my car, my colleague gave a shout of triumph. "AHA! See! I told you!" And indeed I had no defences. If it were not for the sign labelling the room "kindergarten" I would not have been able to distinguish that class from the class

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of first or second graders in that school. Countering that one experience is certainly not a sufficient sample of kindergartens in the area, I suggested we visit other schools in other communities to see what kindergartens there were like. Unfortunately for me, or for the children, more often than not, although the kindergartens that we visited were often different in physical characteristics of the classroom and differences in the amount of time children spent in school each day, there were few differences in the goals, purposes or methods of instruction. The kindergartens we visited seemed more like the primary classrooms in their schools than had been the case in the years when I was a classroom teacher.

If the impression gained in this experience holds over a large segment of the early childhood scene, and there is evidence that this is indeed the case, then a major shift has taken place in the relationship of the kindergarten to the primary school. It is this shift that may be impacting on kindergartens today.

Marvin Lazarson's (1972) chapter in the 71st NSSE Yearbook on early childhood education, identified three thrusts that have dominated the history of early childhood education. "The first has been the expectation that schooling of young children will lead to social reform. . . . The second theme involves the uniqueness and importance of childhood. . . . The third theme focusses on the impact of early childhood education on the schools." (pp. 33-34) In regards to the last thrust, the nursery school and kindergarten were both seen as having an influence on the elementary school leading to its modification.

As an example of this influence, Nina Vanderwalker (1907) in the Sixth Yearbook of the N.S.S.S.E. cites numerous influences that the emerging kindergarten was having then on elementary schools, including the adoption of art, music, games, and nature study as worthy elements of elementary curriculum which were first included in the kindergarten curriculum. It is doubtful that the influence even at that time was all one sided, nor did the introduction of the kindergarten into the public elementary schools necessarily create a comfortable relationship in the public elementary schools. One year later Benjamin C. Gregory (1908) wrote in the seventh yearbook of the association:

> In passing from the kindergarten to the primary school, there is a break. Do what you will to soften the change, to modify the break, it still remains a break. Three general methods of dealing with the difficulty have been employed: (1) To provide a connecting class to take the child out of his kindergarten habits and introduce him to those of the primary school: in the words of some teachers, "to make him over." (2) To modify the kindergarten and made it more nearly resemble the primary schools. (3) To modify the primary school to make it more nearly resemble the kindergarten. To these might be added a fourth: To do a little bit of each. (p. 22)

While there are instances of developments in primary education impacting on the education of younger children (the creation of the progressive kindergarten was a reconstruction influenced by the progressive education movement in general), over the years the thrust has been that

concerns and theories rooted in the education of the youngest have led continually to changes in educational approaches for children at somewhat older levels.

As we move through history we continue to see the influences mentioned by Vanderwalker and Gregory. The 28th Yearbook of the N.S.S.E. again focussed on early childhood education (Its title, Preschool and Parental Education, reflected changes in the field since 1908). The following passage again shows evidence of this influence:

> A modern progressive primary grade room does not look unlike a kindergarten room. . . . The same informal organization is carried on with the children gradually assuming more and more responsibility for the conduct of the room. Children are given the opportunity to carry out their own aims and purposes and to judge their results. . . . As in the kindergarten, the children move freely, work individually or in small self-organized groups. . . . The subject matter of the first grade is related to and grows out of the activities. . . . While acquiring information and developing skills are not overlooked, the emphasis is on social living and the development of character. (pp. 260-261)

This brief historical review has been presented in order to show what has been the past relationship between the kindergarten and the elementary school to provide a comparison to the present relationship. More often than not, kindegarten programs today are viewed as extensions downward of the elementary school. The influence on the kindergarten by the primary grades seems to be changing kindergarten practice. In reconstituting the kindergarten to make it more responsive to the needs of primary education, a number of strategies have been taken. One is to adopt prescribed prepared educational programs that are an extension downward of textbook series in academic areas. The rationale often given for this strategy is that such adoptions insure the continuity of learning as children move through their elementary educational experience.

Other prescriptive programs have also been suggested and adopted that are kindergarten specific, but are designed to insure that children will learn those prerequisites necessary for success in later school learning. Many of these are based upon nationally validated early childhood curricula that were originally designed for handicapped or potentially handicapped young children (Fallon, 1973). In many cases the activities prescribed are tied to a screening or evaluation instrument, so that success or failure on a specific test item will require the child to go through a related sequence of learning activities. In both of these kinds of adoptions, once the program is selected, teachers become less decision makers and more technicians implementing predetermined decisions made by program developers remote from the learning situation.

A number of influences have led to this present situation. Among those influences I would like to discuss are the following:

1. Kindergarten attendance has become the rule rather than the exception;

2. There have been major shifts in the orientations of early childhood curriculum;

3. There have been parallel shifts in developmental theories used to justify early childhood curriculum;

4. There has been a societal press to offer academic instruction at an early age.

5. There has been an increase in the use of standardized achievement tests in evaluating the educational progress of young children; and

6. Many kindergarten teachers are inadequately prepared to be effective early childhood curriculum makers.

1. Kindergarten the rule, rather than the exception.

It is interesting to note that at the time that the statements presented above were made about the influence of the kindergrten on the elementary school, relatively few young children attended public tax-supported kindergartens. Kindergartens were introduced in the United States in 1856. The establishment of the kindergarten as part of the public school system in the United States has been a slow and gradual process. Kindergartens became a tax-supported feature of the school system in St. Louis in 1870. Yet is was estimated that in 1922, over 50 years later, only about 12% of the five-year-olds in the United States attended kindergarten. (Whipple, 1929) By 1965 less than half of the five-year-olds in the United States were in educational programs, while by 1974 that number had increased to almost 80%. (King, 1975)

Thus only in the last decade or so could elementary program designers expect that children entering the primary grades would have been in the kindergarten. Once kindergarten attendance became the norm, it received much more the attention from those who develop elementary programs and educational materials. Schools became more concerned with articulation and kindergartens began to be viewed as a reasonable part of the total educational experience of all children (despite the fact that few kindergarten children are compelled to attend school). With this, more serious attempts were made to bring the kindergarten into the educational fold, attempts that seemed to have begun with its first introduction.

2. There have been major shifts in the orientation of early childhood curriculum.

The history of early childhood education can be characterized by both continuities and discontinuities. The continuities of early childhood programs can be seen in the persistent concern for two types of goals for young children: one with the support or stimulation of growth or development the other with the achieving of specific learnings (Spodek, 1976). The concern for growth could be found in the original Froebelian kindergarten. This same concern was articulated in a different way in the reform of kindergarten practice that led to the progressive kindergarten during the first third of the present century as well as in the development of the nursery school period.

The articulation of the reform kindergarten with the progressive primary school was supported by a mutual concern for the growth of the child (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972). As the progressive education movement wained, there was a lessening of concern for development and an increase in the concern for achieving specific learning outcomes. This concern for learning was imposed upon the kindergarten as well, with the kindergarten conceived of as preparing children for the learning they will achieve in later school years. Gans, Almy and Stendler (1952) characterized this readiness view of the kindergarten as the 3Rs Curriculum some thirty years ago:

> The 3Rs approach has not only prevailed in the primary grades, but it has reached down into the five-year-old kindergarten. Counting, some writing and reading readiness activities chiefly in the form of workbook exercises have been typical experiences in kindergarten where this curriculum has been in operation. Under such a setup the kindergarten is seen as a year of settling down for children, of adjusting to sitting still and following directions, so that they will be better prepared for a more rigorous attack on the 3Rs during first grade. (p. 80-81)

The difference between the kindergartens of thirty years ago and those of today is not with overall concerns, but with the intensity of academic instruction in the kindergarten. Instead of being concerned with using the kindergarten year to get children prepared for the organization of the primary grades, often both the organization and the content of these grades have been introduced into the kindergarten. Thus a learning orientation had replaced the development orientation in these kindergartens.

3. There have been major shifts in the developmental theories used to justify early childhood curriculum.

The advent of the Headstart program has been characterized as resulting from the joining of new views of human development with new concerns for social justice. At the same time as educators seemed to be increasing their concerns for the problems of disadvantaged children, new ideas relating to cognitive development, and especially to the importance of the early years on this development, seemed to be coming to the fore. The work of Jean Piaget, which had been accumulating for decades, began to receive the attention of American psychologists and educators. Piaget's theories described children's cognitive development as moving through a series of stages with achievement at later stages dependent upon successful progress through earlier stages. The early experience of the child were seen as having significant impact on the total intellectual development, even though direct instruction was not viewed as effective in moving children through these stages. Hunt, in his classic formulation, Intelligence and Experience (1961) brought together a wealth of theory and research from many sources that supported the idea that these early experiences could have a major impact on the developing intellect. Bloom's (1964) analysis of test data on intelligence suggested that a great deal of variance in later tests of intelligence could be accounted for by variance in tests taken before five years of age. Thus, it was demonstrated that what children learn early in life could impact on their continued learning.

In addition to this, behavioral psychologists were demonstrating that by manipulating the motivational sets of children and by analyzing complex tasks into simpler components to be taught separately and later integrated, many specific skills could be learned by children at an early age. Behavioral principles were used to understand development and to provide the basis for systematic programs to teach young children. (Bijou & Baer, 1961).

While each of the developmental theories briefly described above are different from one another, and none of the theories directly translate into kindergarten programs, they have all been used to support the notion that intellectual development begins early in life and that what one learns in the early childhood years can have serious consequences for later learning. Growing out of the research and theory development that took place in child development during this period, a number of educational programs were created for young children at the kindergarten and pre-kindergarten level. Some of these were designed for poor children, as were those of the Planned Variations of Headstart and Follow-Through.

While the evidence accumulated that there was much that young children could learn prior to first grade, there has been no unanimity on the issue of what young children ought to learn, what priorities ought to be given to the different learnings that are possible and what the long term consequences of particular learnings are. As kindergartens moved under the influences of the elementary school, in many cases it was felt that those learnings most consistent with what is learned later in school, or which seemed to be preparatory to later school learning, ought to be supported in the kindergarten. Yet there is no evidence that there are greater long term payoffs for these kinds of learning activities than for activities more consistent with the growth ideology of the kindergarten.

4. The press for early instruction in academic skills

There have been a number of influences that have led to the increased concern for teaching academic skills in the kindergarten. On the one hand, there seem always to have been a group of parents who have wished their children to be involved in academic instruction as early as possible. Montessori preschool programs have been attractive to these parents because of the promise offerred that these children will learn the three R's significantly earlier than they have traditionally been taught. Books have been similarly available for parents detailing instructions for parent activities with their infants, toddlers and young children that are purported to give these children superior minds, or at least early access to school learning. Parents of this sort often strive to enroll their children early in school and/or influence the school to make academics available to their children at the earliest possible moment. Many of these parents have gifted children, or at least veiw their children as gifted.

The greater pressure to offer early instruction in academic skills, however, has resulted from the broader concern that the public schools may not be adequately preparing all children in the area of basic academic skills. The perceived failure of the public school system to provide adequate instruction in basic adacemic skills has led to a number of suggested solutions. One of the more popular has been the imposition of

minimum competency tests which children would have to pass before moving on to higher levels of education (to higher grades or to other institutions). Another solution has been to offer instruction in the academic skills at the earliest possible moment.

The logic of this latter position seems inviolate. When the teaching of academic skills has begun in grade one, there were failures. Some of these failures could be overcome by providing additional instructional time. This time can be provided earlier by beginning instruction one year sooner than had been the case, thus providing the time for additional instruction well before the initial assessment of success. There are a number of concerns that might be raised with this approach. To add instructional time for academic skills within the kindergarten requires that the time be taken from some other activities, activities which in themselves ought to be considered educational. Thus there are no absolute gains in learning, but rather trade-offs; at best achievement is gained in one area at the expense of achievement in other areas. With the addition of instruction in academics in the kindergarten, the losses have been in terms of those activities that traditionally have been highly prized: art, music, science (nature study) as well as opportunities for expression and play. These were the activities that in the past have been highly prized and for which kindergartens were applauded for having introduced into the elementary school in years past.

In addition, one can question what actually is taught in kindergartens in relation to academics. In moving the academic areas down, too often the focus has been on their mechanical aspects. These are not the aspects of academic learning in which children have shown their greatest failings later in their school careers, although they may be the areas assessed most often in early administrations of achievement tests.

5. The increased use of standardized tests to assess school achievement.

Directly related to the concern for successful instruction in the basic skills has been an increased call for the use of standardized achievement tests to periodically and regularly assess the achievement of these skills in children. While in the past educators often advocated postponing administering standardized achievement tests to children until they were out of the primary grades, these tests are being administered to children now at earlier and earlier ages. With such tests being used to assess learning and instruction, they also influence what is taught.

A concrete example of the relationship of testing to the teaching of basic skills can be found in a National Conference on Achievement Testing and Basic Skills called by the National Institute of Education of the Department of Health Education and Welfare in March of 1978. The call at that conference, by educators and politicals alike, was for the improvement of instruction in basic academic skills and for the regular and continued administration of standardized achievement tests as a way of improving instruction in basic academic skills.

Since the content of most standardized achievement tests in the early grades is related to the mechanics of reading, language and arithmetic, and since programs at these grades are to be assessed by achievement of

children in these tests, then the focus on instruction has more often leaned towards teaching letter-sound associations, computation skills, spelling, punctuation and the like, rather than higher order academic processes such as comprehension, problem solving, and the application of principles to real problems.

One of the problems encountered in the recent evaluation of the program models in Follow Through was that the instruments used to evaluate academic acheivement were more appropriate in some areas than those used in other areas of assessment. Since the most appropriate tests used focussed on achievement in the mechanics of reading, language and arithmetics, those models that emphasized instruction in these areas were strongly favored in the evaluation (House, Glass, McLean & Walker, 1977). Since program elements that are evaluated tend to receive greater attention by school personnel, especially when the schools are themselves being criticized, the use of these tests will influence the programs offered, favoring program elements that are to be evaluated. Program goals such as social competence, for which there are no adequate standardized measures, will tend to have lower priorities.

6. The inadequate preparation of kindergarten teachers

Within the early childhood tradition, the teacher is seen as the individual responsible for the development and modification of the curriculum. Teachers must know a great deal in order to create and choose appropriate educational activities to be included in the program for a group of young children. This knowledge is provided in programs of teacher preparation and is attested to by state teacher certification. The existing knowledge of teacher preparation and certification in early childhood education has recently been surveyed (Spodek & Saracho, in press). Generally programs require that teachers have knowledge of principles of learning and of child growth and development as well as foundation and general education knowledge. Most important is the knowledge of curriculum and methods of teaching appropriate to the age level of the children to be taught. Opportunities to practice utilizing this knowledge is provided in practicum situations within the programs.

In the last survey of teacher certification programs related to early childhood education in the United States, it was shown that even though kindergarten teachers may have completed teacher education programs and be certified, they might not necessarily know a great deal about early childhood education. Of the 44 states responding to a survey as requiring kindergarten teachers to be certified, 35 reported that kindergarten teachers were required to be certified in elemetary education. In only eight of these was a kindergarten or early childhood endorsement available. Thus in the majority of states, anyone prepared to be an elementary school teacher is considered competent to teach kindergarten. (Education Commission of the States, 1975)

Given this preparation of kindergarten teachers, it is reasonable to assume that those persons expected to be responsible for making major educational decisions in the kindergarten have not been adequately prepared to make those decisions. Teachers prepared in an elementary tradition would have knowledge of elementary education methods and cur-

riculum, but not of the early childhood tradition. It would be reasonable to expect those teachers to view the moving down of elementary programs as appropriate.

Even those teachers prepared in an early childhood tradition may not be adequately prepared to cope with program decisions in the kindergarten. The child development point of view in that tradition more often than not reflects a growth mentality which may be inadequate for assimilating the demands of teaching academic subjects. Teachers trained in this tradition might only have their own expereince in elementary school to rely on as the basis for devisions about academics.

The six influences that have been discussed here seem to be shaping kindergarten practices today. No doubt others exist as well. In any one community a number of these influences may be impacting on decisions about what to offer children in the kindergarten. With the demands for greater emphasis on academic areas of learning and with greater reliance on standardized tests for assessing instruction coupled with the unsureness kindergarten teachers might feel about the nature of the programs they have been offering, decisions may be given to others to make. Packaged programs coupled with assessment devices or integrated into a total textbook adoption packages may be difficult to resist. The process of local program development at the school level may be giving way in many communities to more general program adoptions. The idea of tailoring programs to meet individual children's needs and interests may be giving way to adopting programs that will lead children to score well on test or fit more comfortably into later instructional offerings.

There is no way to tell where any particular school or school system is moving today. Influences tend to rise and wane. No longer, however, can we look to the pronouncements of experts in early childhood education or to the prescriptions provided in teacher education textbooks to identify the kinds of programs developing in kindergartens today. Rather we need to look at individual classrooms to identify existing programs, and to probe for influences that shape kindergarten practice, including influences within individual teachers, within the profession, within school systems, and within communities.

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